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Congress and the CIA

It is to be hoped that President Eisenhower will be able to calm down congressional irritation over the Central Intelligence Agency which, under Allen Dulles, is charged with secretly obtaining information abroad. For a long time Congress has felt that the agency also is too secretive in Washington. And now the Senate Rules Committee has favorably reported a bill by Senator Mike Mansfield, Montana Democrat, for the appointment of a "watchdog" committee.

This is a situation which should be handled with cool, common sense and not with emotions running high. The Rules Committee complains that secrecy "now beclouds everything about CIA, its cost, its personnel, its efficiency, its failures. An aura of superiority has been built up around it. It is freed from practically every ordinary form of congressional review."

That any agency should function without responsibility to Congress—and so to the sovereign people—goes against constitutional principles. Yet the world we live in demands some espionage and counter-espionage, new and distasteful as this may be to those who have not quite adjusted to the grim dictates of H-bombs and intercontinental bombers. Since the nation hardly can take a blind chance on survival, there must be compromise between ideals and realities.

The Joint Atomic Energy Committee offers some guidance here. At least so long as atomic processes were an American monopoly, it also was desirable to maintain secrecy even when Congress was asked to appropriate billions. The joint committee met this dilemma. Because adequate information was given to a limited number of trusted Senators and Representatives, Congress was able to vote funds with a sense of responsibility, and it was possible at the same time to avoid airing all the activities of the AEC in debates on Capitol Hill. Why cannot this formula be fully applied to the CIA?

Secrecy so complete that it recognizes no responsibility to Congress is not consistent with popular government. But democracy is not so inflexible that it cannot solve a problem such as that of the CIA with minimum risk. And the problem should be sensibly worked out because failure to do so could build up a resentment which might end by casting prudence and wisdom to the winds.